Outdoor settings help enhance walking routines

U-M environmental psychologists suggest that walking in more natural, less built-up environments tends to prolong the duration of physically and mentally healthy outdoor exercise.

In a 2004 survey of experienced walkers, researchers at the School of Natural Resources and Environment (SNRE) report that respondents who walked in natural settings with woods, water and vegetation on average spent 10 minutes longer on their outings—a 12.5 percent increase over those who exercised in urban areas or neighborhoods.

"What our survey results show is that certain types of environments facilitate extended walking," says Jason Duvall, a doctoral student specializing in resource policy and behavior. "The fact that people who walk in natural settings tend to walk for longer periods of time suggests there is something special about those settings."

Environmental psychologists study the interactions between humans and their surrounding environment. They theorize that people who spend time in nature reap the dual benefits of physical exercise and mental revitalization.

"One goal of this research initiative is to help increase the number of people who are sustaining a year-round walking routine in northern climates, thus improving the general quality of public health," says Raymond De Young, associate professor of environmental psychology and conservation behavior.

Outcomes researchers hope for include improved physical health and mental wellbeing, and possibly deeper connections with the local environment.

Duvall and De Young gave written surveys to 71 individuals classified as regular walkers, meaning they spent at least 30 minutes three days a week walking. Sixty-one returned surveys. On average participants report walking for more than 14 years, take about six walks per week and spend just over 40 minutes on each outing. Participants predominantly were women ages 20-60+.

Among the three top strategies the respondents endorsed as being most helpful for maintaining a regular walking routine were seeking good routes, using health goals as a motivation and preparing for bad weather.

-Claudia Capos, SNRE